

### The Writer's Apprenticeship

**M**OST of the writers we know taught themselves what they have learned of their art. The methods they pursued were as various as their personalities. Many of the reporters and at least one of the advertising copywriters of our time in Chicago looked with sheep's eyes in the direction of literature. The brown paper-covered package under the reporter's arm was almost certainly an unpublished novel or play.

Some of the lads turned out to be quite fertile. Sherwood Anderson at that time was the author of four unaccepted novels. He used whatever leisure an advertising copywriter had to whip his material into saleable form. Floyd Dell was the first after Anderson to shed his newspaper skin and emerge as a novelist. Francis Hackett, bright boy recently from Dublin, tried novels and turned more surely to biography. Carl Sandburg added to his salary as a reporter by winning prize money and fame with poems. Then he turned to biography. Lucian Cary and Courtney Ryley Cooper stepped directly from the newspaper city room into the short story markets.

All these writers and Ben Hecht, too, who belonged to a slightly younger school of reporters, were honestly interested in writing as a fine art. They tried their talents at various forms. As we recall their earlier struggles, the desire to earn larger sums of money was not their driving motive.

Not all of these men were college graduates. Dell used to boast that he was innocent of formal education. Sandburg, whose "Abraham Lincoln" is one of the finest American biographies, was not able to complete his college course. All of them were prodigious readers and most had had less college work than the minimum accepted for the lowest degree. As truly as is anyone, they were self-taught. Reading, talking, and practice writing were their disciplines.

The methods are different today. We saw a class in journalism at one of the New York colleges that quite filled a large auditorium. Nearly seven hundred men, women, and children were marching toward writing by the Chautauqua or tiger-hunt method. Game was stalked by bushbeaters, captured, skinned, and sometimes exhibited. It was evident from their questions and comments that not all this assemblage were inspired by any deep affection for excellent writing, or ambitious to add to the resources of literature. We suspect that the possibility of earning some of the easy money reputedly paid press agents, script writers, and some of the other stepbrothers and sisters of journalists is the magnet. By those who do neither, writing is esteemed a lighter task than wielding a shovel.

The opportunities to earn money by various types of commercial writing actually have increased enormously during the past quarter of a century. Press agents years ago were half-caste reporters. Now public relations counselors, sons of the same old scallwags, are firmly established as leaders in corporate, governmental, labor union, and social welfare activities; in fact, in nearly every type of human organization that depends in any way upon a friendly public opinion. The radio and the movie industries require the services of thousands of men and women possessing some skill in the use of words. Advertising agencies have grown vastly and they, too, require the services of writers. It is natural that the ambitious young should respond to such invitations.

We don't think, however, that journalism in its self-respecting varieties or literature in any except its meaner forms can effectually be learned in mass trade schools. Of course the best general education available is a great asset to any intending writer as to any other civilized human being. But it scarcely seems worth the effort to go to a trade school to learn the meager craft technique of journalism, and we are persuaded that no institutions exist able to give much competent guidance to the creative writer, beyond the amateur stage.

The externals can be taught in schools or learned individually from books. Most that is known about literary form in writing is available in high-school rhetoric texts. Aristotle covered the subject concisely, if briefly, some time ago. Teachers of literature have been expounding the same doctrine during at least twenty-two hundred years—with no great success. Aristotle was somewhat too compact for easy comprehension, and the school texts generally lack vividness. For those who can't be bothered to learn

from Aristotle or the school rhetoricians there are various practical handbooks such as Arthur Sullivant Hoffman's recent "Fiction Writing Self-Taught"\* as well as numerous correspondence courses in our more populous universities.

Mr. Hoffman for many years has advised writers who hope to sell their short stories and novels to magazines. His function is that of the coach or trainer. His latest book of advice is aimed at that very considerable group who are practising fiction-writing in private. His counsel is strictly that of the journeyman. Fiction-writing in the view of his book is a trade as definite as that of the plumber or sign-painter, and requires only slightly more imagination, learning, or anything else above the neck. If the amateurs who use his book have the resources of mind and experience and the special qualities essential to successful writing, help can, however, be had from such texts. His picture of the architecture of the short story and of the novel, for that matter, is correct. His methods of self-analysis are sound if they can be applied.

It is of course possible to learn the trade of writing, granted a minimum of capacity, sufficiently well to obtain and to hold jobs that involve the use of words but that have nothing to do with literature. The self-teaching that precedes the writing of a story or novel or play having any claim to be considered literature, is, obviously, a much more profound and searching process than that offered by the schools of journalism or the coaches or the handbooks. This self-criticism that compels the conscientious writer to work and re-work his material, discarding whatever is not relevant to his chosen theme, building his characters to play their necessary roles, throwing away all that does not truly contribute to the fulfilment of his primary intention, is not a light achievement.

We would not suggest that in the process of learning much attention be paid, in the early stages at least, to form. The story told is still the thing and the story is as good only as the materials that go into it. Life in its largest aspects is the great text. The capacity of the writer to feel, to see, to understand, to interpret, and to record in living words is the final measure of the success of anything written. Endowed with such gifts, men and women do teach themselves to write fiction and other varieties of literature. They are seeking other goals than those set to attract students of the easier ways to writing.

WILLIAM L. CHENERY

\*FICTION WRITING SELF-TAUGHT. By Arthur Sullivant Hoffman. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1939. 224 pp., with index. \$1.75.

## Letters to

### The MacLeish Appointment

SIR:—I assume that Mr. Canby was trying to clarify the issues in his recent editorial on "Archibald MacLeish and the Library of Congress," but in so doing he has misunderstood the point of view of the librarians who are protesting Mr. MacLeish's appointment, and his editorial therefore adds nothing but more confusion.

In the first place, his conception of what a modern American librarian is and does is antiquated, to say the least. To characterize librarianship as "the technique of book-getting and book-keeping" is simply nonsense and an amazingly ignorant statement. The really successful librarian in this country has always been one who happens to be (to quote your criteria), "an executive, broadly trained, who has demonstrated his scholarship, his ability to organize, and his capacity for representing a great storehouse of intellectual energy."

Those traits are the very ones we librarians want to see in the Librarian of Congress because we know that the position demands them. We as a profession would oppose, most emphatically, the appointment of a mere technician to the position.

Now if Mr. Canby will read the biographical sketch of MacLeish (written by himself) found in "Living Authors," p. 246, and compare the facts listed there with the criteria he has set up, he may understand what we librarians are driving at.

It should be emphasized that this situation is embarrassing to us librarians because it forces us to seem to criticize Mr. MacLeish when most of us have the highest regard for him as a gentleman and a writer, and a great liberal. We like him but we can find nothing in the records that convinces us that he is the man for the leadership of one of the greatest libraries in the world. Do you have any facts that might change our minds?

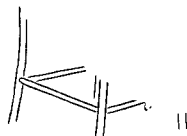
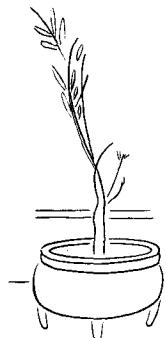
DR. RALPH E. ELLSWORTH,  
Director of Libraries

University of Colorado

*Dr. Ellsworth's letter was written before the appearance of our issue of June 24, containing John Chamberlain's article, which pointed out many of Mr. MacLeish's qualifications.*

SIR:—I assure P. E. G. Quercus that there is a great deal more to being Librarian of Congress than possession of an ignorance of the Dewey Decimal system. Really, such remarks as this: "ten thousand people can easily be hired who know all about the Dewey Decimals" bring one to the verge of despair!

I have followed Mr. MacLeish for years with admiration and interest. I am willing to grant that he is a scholar, that he may be an able executive.



"I've read everything Pearl Buck has ever written and I still can't manage these chopsticks."

I grant that he has imagination. These things, however, do not qualify him to administer a vast and complex organization of whose many functions, of whose technique, of whose policy he knows nothing. The Librarian of Congress must constantly decide points of procedure which shape the policy of the Library. He must arbitrate between departments and between individuals whose problems he understands. He must assure the appointment to his staff of people whose fitness for the position he can judge. Though he may never have to catalog a book or perform other "technical" duties, he should, surely, know something of these things which are the basis of the entire structure for whose administration he is responsible. He must, day after day, evaluate, judge, and act wisely in matters which require specialized experience. Since you do not require these things of Mr. MacLeish, what is it you are thinking of him as doing as Librarian of Congress? Do you wish him simply for a scholarly ornament? How he can be anything else in that position until after years of study and hard experience, I fail to see. Mr. MacLeish's acceptance of the appointment without any doubts or hesitation is simply a sign that he fails to realize the great and special requirements of the task.

We of the library profession are a long-suffering group—we stay quiet and comparatively philosophical under the pressure of thousands of laymen, who, without any experience other than that of having drawn a book out

of a library, feel themselves qualified to speak confidently of library organization and policy. If I now seem unduly excited it is because, under Dr. Putnam's administration, the Library of Congress has become our ideal and our chief source of pride, and we are jealous that it shall continue so.

VIOLA I. MAUSETH,  
St. Olaf College Library  
Northfield, Minn.

*In connection with the MacLeish appointment, we quote a short passage from Nicholas Murray Butler's forthcoming autobiography, "Across the Busy Years" (Scribners), relating to the discussions preceding the appointment of a librarian in 1899: "I had taken a very great interest in the Library of Congress, in securing appropriations for the present building and in working out an administrative scheme that would permit it to become a center of enlightenment and scholarship worthy of the nation. To this end it seemed to me important that the annual appropriations for the support of the Library be much increased and that a first-rate librarian be appointed by the President. . . . On the latter point I discussed names with President McKinley at some length and told him that in my judgment what was wanted was a first-rate administrator with a knowledge of men and of books rather than a mere bureaucrat or a mere bibliophile. He agreed to this and asked me to suggest names. . . ."*